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SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY, EMERGING THREATS, AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Christopher Shays, Connecticut
Chairman
Room B-372 Rayburn Building
Washington, D.C. 20515
Tel: 202 225-2548
Fax: 202 225-2382

“Sexual Assault and Violence Against Women in the Military and at the Academies”

Statement of Rep. Christopher Shays
June 27, 2006

At the 1991 Tailhook Symposium, an annual convention supported by the military and attended by active duty, reserve and retired aviators, 83 women were assaulted. One of those women, Lieutenant Paula Coughlin, a helicopter pilot, reported the assault to her boss. He said, “That’s what you get when you go to a hotel party with a bunch of drunken aviators.”

Our military men and women are committed to serving our country. They deserve to be educated, trained and to operate in an environment that is free of sexual harassment and assault.

After Tailhook, the Department of Defense made changes to their policy addressing charges of sexual assault. Commanders know charges of sexual assault must be taken seriously. The question remains whether they take these charges seriously. This Committee has concern about the Department of Defense’s commitment to aggressively prevent and respond to sexual assault incidents.

The 2005 Defense Task Force on Sexual Harassment and Violence at the Military Service Academies finds that sexual assault has been inadequately addressed at the Academies.

The Task Force states sexual harassment typically creates an environment in which sexual assault is more likely to occur. The Report makes several recommendations to prevent and respond to sexual harassment and violence against women.

Today we ask what Task Force recommendations have been put into effect including:

- changing Service Academy culture toward women;
- protecting communications made by victims of sexual assault;
- establishing a plan to implement the Department of Defense Sexual Assault Response Policy;
- amending the Uniform Code of Military Justice to permit closed proceedings to protect the privacy of both sexual assault victims and offenders;
- incorporating sexual harassment and assault education classes into the Academy curriculum;
- developing an institutional sexual harassment and assault prevention plan; and
- establishing collaborative relationships with civilian authorities for sexual assault victim support.

Congress recognized sexual assault is more than a Service Academy problem and directed the Department of Defense establish a Task Force on Sexual Assault in the Military Services. Although this directive was part of the FY 2005 Defense Authorization Act, the Task Force is not yet operational, in fact its members have not been appointed. This inaction speaks volumes.

The second major question we ask today is when will the Defense Task Force on Sexual Assault in the Military Services become operational, and when will its recommendations be presented to the public?

A viable military comprised of men and women requires continuous, dedicated efforts to prevent sexual assault and violence, and to respond forcefully once it occurs. These efforts must begin when the service member enters the military, not just at our Service Academies where we train some of our future military leaders.

But we should not stop there. We must provide an environment in the military at large that does not condone hostile attitudes and inappropriate actions toward women.

Our military leaders must ensure our men and women who honorably serve our country are fully aware sexual assault and harassment will not be tolerated and know that victims who come forward will receive support, medical care and legal protection.

We thank all the witnesses for taking the time to appear before us today.